



Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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POOR WATER QUALITY IN IOWA WETLANDS MAY THREATEN MIGRATING WATERFOWL

By Lowell Washburn
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

KEOKUK---This year's spring migration has gathered a full head of steam. Hundreds of thousands of waterfowl are currently winging their way northward across Iowa.

Twenty years ago, the lesser scaup was one of our most common spring visitors. Recently, however, scaup populations have continued to show an alarming, downhill slide. The total number of breeding scaup [also referred to as bluebills] has declined from more than 6 million birds during the 1970's, to an average of just under 4 million during the past ten years.

No one can say for sure why these popular waterfowl are on the wane. But ongoing investigations are beginning to point a finger at declining water quality values in Iowa wetlands.

"What we do know is that when migrating scaup arrive at Keokuk [on Pool 19 of the upper Mississippi River] their body weights are at or above historic levels. Ironically, when those same ducks arrive in northern Minnesota, they have a substantially *lower* body weight than when they arrived there during the mid-1980s," says Iowa DNR Waterfowl Biologist, Guy Zenner.

For reasons not totally understood, migrating scaup are losing critical body reserves as they migrate across Iowa. Those reserves, say scientists, are a critical requirement for successful reproduction. Those declining body weights, says Zenner, are resulting in later nesting dates, reduced [egg] clutch size, and reduced survival of adult females.

Scientists from Louisiana to Canada are currently investigating the ongoing dilemma. In addition to looking at the body condition of individual ducks, wildlife biologists are also taking a serious look at the overall health of the wetlands, migrating scaup and other birds utilize during spring migration.

"This is a huge endeavor," said Zenner. "Essentially, our focus is to examine groupings of wetlands that have been divided into eight eco-regions. Our study area runs from central Iowa to Riding Mountain National Park in western Manitoba."

One of the things scientists are most interested in is population densities of invertebrate animal life. Invertebrates such as amphipods -- a tiny crustacean resembling fairy shrimp -- are critical for building nutrient reserves needed for [scaup] egg production.

Studies are also examining aquatic plant life, existing fish populations, water clarity, chemical and other pollutant contamination.

"Water quality sampling began in 2003, and what we're finding is that scaup are currently unable to find the essential food items that were historically available in mid-western wetlands," said Zenner. "Important aquatic foods have disappeared as our wetlands have become horribly degraded during the past 25 years. This should come as no great surprise since our marshlands are stuck in the middle of the most intensively farmed region in the entire Midwest."

For lesser scaup to maintain the healthy body condition needed for egg production, they must have amphipods, says Zenner. Historically, it was no problem to find that nutritional source in Iowa. Today, wetland water quality has been compromised to the point that amphipods no longer exist in most marshlands. Migrating ducks are now forced to feed on other, more pollutant-tolerant inverts -- such as snails. But even these alternate food sources may be in short supply. Consequently, scaup end up surviving on things like aquatic seeds or bloodworms, which are insufficient to increase or even maintain body weights.

Here's the alarming truth. In terms of amphipod, snail, mollusk, and other important invertebrate food families --- Iowa ranks at the very bottom of all wetland groups examined from central Iowa to Canada.

At the same time, Iowa is at the very top of the list for nitrates, phosphorus levels, rough fish densities, low water clarity, and the sad list goes on.

"I think that everyone living in Iowa should be very dismayed by these findings," said Zenner. "It has now become very evident that our state's wetlands are not as healthy as they appeared at a glance. We've learned that the quality of any Iowa wetland is simply a mirror image of the quality of its watershed. Protecting or improving those watersheds has become our next challenge."

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NORTHERN PIKE COLLECTION UNDERWAY ON MISSISSIPPI RIVER

GUTTENBERG – Crews with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources are collecting northern pike in the shallow backwaters of Pools 10 and 11 of the upper Mississippi River. The goal is to collect enough eggs to hatch about 1.5 million fish, which works out to about 90 females and 270 males.

Northern pike eggs will hatch after 10 days to two weeks. Most northern are stocked as fry but about 350,000 of the newly hatched fry will be shipped to Spirit Lake to grow to 2 to 3 inches. Those larger fingerling fish have a higher survival rate and will be stocked in rivers and lakes, mostly across northern Iowa.

Crews will collect fish for five to seven days.

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PRAIRIE RESCUE 2005 COMES TO BRUSHY CREEK

LEHIGH — Central Iowa volunteers will return to their roots next weekend at Brushy Creek State Recreation Area.

The sixth annual Iowa Statewide Prairie Rescue – a series of volunteer efforts to save Iowa's prairie habitat – comes to Brushy Creek on Saturday, April 2. Volunteers will remove invasive woody species from a section of prairie, helping to restore and preserve Iowa's natural heritage.

Volunteers should meet at 9 a.m. at the Brushy Creek park office, located at 3175 290th Street, in Lehigh. The event will begin with a short presentation on native species and end, weather permitting, with a controlled burn.

"This will give people the opportunity to see the whole cycle, from starting grasses to fire to regeneration," said Brushy Creek Park Manager Chad Kelchen.

The Brushy Creek rescue is part of a wider effort to preserve the dwindling Iowa prairie. Native grasslands once covered 70-percent of the state but have been reduced to 0.1-percent of its original size. The remnants, scattered in small patches throughout Iowa, now require the assistance of natural resources staff and volunteers to survive. Fire suppression and habitat fragmentation have rendered the prairies vulnerable to encroaching invasive species.

Prairie Rescue 2005 lets volunteers reconnect with Iowa's prairie roots, and help save this beautiful habitat before it is lost forever. Roughly 25 events will occur across the state throughout April and May. For a complete listing, please visit: www.inhf.org/prairierescue2005.html. Sponsors include the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, and other natural resources groups.

Individuals, families and organizations are all invited to participate. Volunteers should dress for the weather (pants and long-sleeves are recommended) and consider bringing a hat, sunscreen, and water. Brushy Creek volunteers should bring a sack lunch and pruners, if possible.

For more information about the Brushy Creek Rescue, contact CHAD KELCHEN at (515) 543-8298 or at Chad.Kelchen@dnr.state.ia.us. For more information about Statewide Prairie Rescue 2005 contact Katie Kemp at (515) 281-3134 or Katie.Kemp@dnr.state.ia.us.

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PRAIRIE RESCUE 2005 COMES TO WAUBONSIE, PREPARATION CANYON

DES MOINES – Western Iowa volunteers will return to their roots next weekend at Waubonsie and Preparation Canyon State Parks.

The sixth annual Iowa Statewide Prairie Rescue – a series of volunteer efforts to save Iowa's prairie habitat – will bring events to Waubonsie and Preparation Canyon on Saturday, April 9. Volunteers will remove invasive woody species from prairies, helping to restore and preserve Iowa's natural heritage.

Waubonsie volunteers should meet at 9 a.m. at the overlook parking lot, at 2585 Waubonsie Park Road, Hamburg.

Preparation Canyon volunteers should meet at 9 a.m. at the parking lot and campsite access point at 32324 Peach Avenue, Moorhead.

These rescues are part of a wider effort to preserve the dwindling Iowa prairie. Native grasslands once covered 70-percent of the state, but have been reduced to 0.1-

percent of their original size. The remnants, scattered in small patches throughout Iowa, now require the assistance of natural resources staff and volunteers to survive. Fire suppression and habitat fragmentation have rendered the prairies vulnerable to encroaching invasive species.

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Individuals, families and organizations are all invited to participate. Volunteers should dress for the weather (pants and long-sleeves are recommended) and consider bringing a hat, sunscreen, and water. Bring handsaws, loppers, and gloves if possible.

For more information about the Preparation Canyon rescue, contact CHRIS ULLRICH at (712) 642-4341. For more information about the Waubonsie rescue, contact RUSSELL FIELD at (712) 423-2829. For more information about Statewide Prairie Rescue 2005 contact Katie Kemp at (515) 281-3134 or Katie.Kemp@dnr.state.ia.us.

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TIME TO ORDER TREES AND SHRUBS

Landowners considering planting some wildlife habitat or preventing soil erosion should act now to order conservation trees and shrubs from the Iowa State Forest Nursery.

"We have excellent supplies of native oaks such as red, white, bur and swamp white along with good quantities of walnut, silver maple and many other species for this spring's planting season," said John Walkowiak, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) forestry bureau.

The State Forest Nursery, in Ames, supplies at the costs of production, conservation bareroot seedlings of more than 40 different native tree and shrub species for Iowa landowners to purchase and plant for conservation purposes such as reforestation, soil erosion control, water quality protection and wildlife habitat.

State Forest Nursery conservation trees and shrubs are for sale from \$25 per 100 plants for evergreen species such as pine and spruce to \$37 to \$45 per 100 plants for hardwood trees and shrubs such as oak and chokecherry. The minimum order is 500 plants.

"If you are looking at just starting out in conservation planting you may want to consider planting a wildlife packet of 200 trees and shrubs. The State Forest Nursery has designed special wildlife packets in cooperation with the National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever and the DNR's wildlife bureau that includes such species

as bur oak, dogwood, pine, Redoiser dogwood, highbush cranberry, wild plum, red cedar, or and others,” Walkowiak said. These wildlife packets sell for \$90.

“For those with a larger backyard, we have a 20 tree and shrub songbird packet of oak, pine, plum, chokecherry, dogwood and serviceberry that was designed in cooperation with Iowa Audubon that sells for \$20,” he said.

For more information or to order conservation trees and shrubs from the State Forest Nursery call 1-800-865-2477 or check out www.iowadnr.com/forestry/ to order online. The State Forest Nursery accepts credit card orders.

For more information, contact Walkowiak at 515-242-5966.

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